

Pere Calders

AMANDA BATH

Pere Calders has been a prolific writer throughout his eventful 75-year life. He published his first published story, «El primer arlequí», at the age of 14 and since then has published some 200 short stories and three novels.

Yet the public has been slow to realise that Calders is one of Catalonia's most talented contemporary writers. Ten years ago few Catalan readers had even heard of him, although today he is being widely read and studied. Literary awards and accolades—such as the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes in 1986— are only now beginning to be bestowed on him.

Calders is primarily a short-story writer, although his novels *L'ombra de l'atzavara* (1962) and *Ronda naval sota la boira* (1966) also testify to his considerable ability as a novelist. His stories are renowned for their unusual imaginative twists, for the originality of their humour, and for the gentle irony with which Calders comments on mankind's predicaments and the curiosities of life.

Calders has been an avid spectator of the technological revolution, enthralled by everything from quartz watches to the latest computer marvels. He seems to consider these advances to be a kind of modern magic, and reminds readers (particularly those in danger of taking it for granted) that fantasy is all around us if we choose to see it. Calders views the world with a child-like naivety, expressing through his work a firm belief in man's need to dream, and his need to marvel at the world he inhabits. Our environment, he says, is a poorer place once all the illusions are shattered and the mysteries solved.

Calders fictional world is filled with descriptions of incongruous or fantastic events—meeting a Martian in a Catalan wood; a tiger taking up residence in the kitchen of an urban apartment; a man who performs miracles. Calders' characters tend to react to such a phenomenon by trying to incorporate it into their familiar world; or by trying to exploit it financially (the good bourgeois response), or by denying that anything strange has happened at all. For the most part, only the children in the stories accept and enjoy such interludes from life's humdrum routine. The adults frequently cannot, or will not, permit the intrusion of magic to widen or disrupt their narrow lives. Ultimately they reject the opportunity offered them to escape from mundane lives through fantasy and imagination.

Although this underlying message might seem pessimistic, it is relieved in the telling by Calders' extraordinary sense of humour. His literary humour is highly successful: he sees potential incongruity all around him and describes it in clear, visual terms with considerable wit. His stories remind English readers of Thurber, while Catalan readers may recall Rusiñol and the «Grup de Sabadell» caricatures of Barce-

lona bourgeois society. The novel *Ronda naval...* contains particularly noteworthy examples of Calders' humour at its most spontaneous and farcical. The work is something of an «anti-novel» which breaks rules and conventions and has the author in the role of comedian or comic-show host, disarming and entertaining the reader with his ready wit, jokes and showmanship.

Calders' has been called a «magic-realist» writer in that his work reveals magic hidden within everyday life, and describes the conflicts that result when people are confronted by the inexplicable. Among his stories there are tales of science fiction, mystery and imagination (cf Edgar Allan Poe), and fairy tales, as well as thoughtful, observant studies of human relationships and modern life styles.

Calders' has shown himself to be an innovator among Catalan writers of his generation, and for many years was a lonely voice proclaiming a highly individual message while others kept their feet on the ground and described social realities. Calder's enforced 25-year residence in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War may have played some part in determining the form taken by his mature work. However, it is important to remember that his first magic-realist stories (including some very good examples) were written before his exile, in the late 1930s. This puts him squarely within the «first generation» of magic-realist writers, contemporary with Borges and predating Cortázar and García Márquez.

It seems likely that had Calders been prepared to write or publish his works in Spanish, which he was not, he would today be enjoying an acclaim similar to that awarded to the Latin American school of magic-realist fiction. The fact that he is still largely unknown beyond Catalonia is a direct result of his determination to remain true to his cultural heritage by writing exclusively in a minority language which was outlawed for almost half of his life. Thankfully, the long years spent in obscurity are now at an end; his work is at last the subject of serious study and is being translated into other languages. It is to be hoped that, as a result, Pere Calders will soon be known internationally, and allotted his well-deserved place among the established literary figures of this century.

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Brush

A children's story

PERE CALDERS

Translated by D. Sam Abrams

THE DAY THAT «TURK», a puppy, chewed up Mr. Sala's hat, Mrs. Sala decided that he had outstepped the bounds of canine decency, and that only a person with the patience of a saint would have allowed things to go that far. And so the family was assembled, everyone's opinion was asked, and it was agreed that the gardener's married daughter would take charge of «Turk» and keep him at her house.

The Sala's little boy was so unhappy he thought he would die. It seemed to him that he would never find the way of carrying on in life; without the dog everything seemed tasteless and senseless. Once he had gotten over crying, he was faced with the problem of finding an honorable use for the amount of affection that Turk's absence had left available. He tried to see his aunt's canary in a new light, but the bird afforded so few really amusing combinations as a playmate that he saw immediately that the relationship would never go beyond a superficial acquaintance.

Then, he tried pretending that the floor lamp in the study was a faithful soldier whose only mission was to serve him. That led him to believe—for two short hours—that his problem was solved but he soon realized that there was still an awful great store of unused affection lost in the nooks and crannies of his soul. Next, he attempted to establish a lasting comradeship with a felt ball, with a clew of string (which, as string goes, was in a class by itself), and, successively, with a mechanical top, a new plant in the garden, and a long pole, which had been the envy of all his friends. And he discovered that all the courageous effort he had put forth to overcome his condition hadn't helped at all, that the difference between all of those things and a dog was so great that it was impossible to forget, not even by pretending. So, at last, he came to the conclusion that he needed to find a «dog substitute»—something that would vaguely resemble a dog, without being detrimental to the memory of Turk.

He went through the house from top to bottom, ransacked all the closets and all the drawers, and finally, in a corner of the attic, he found a big, old-fashioned brush, long since banished by the family. Closing his eyes, he ran the palm of his hand over the bristles, and sure enough, it was as if he were stroking a dog's back. This first test was so conclusive that he decided he need not look any further. He tied it to a piece of string, and in a matter of five minutes he was far from thinking that he was pulling a brush along behind him, and thoroughly convinced that «Brush», a dog of a rare breed, was following him all around the house.

In the evening, a bit tired by his new friend's persistence in following him, the boy went upstairs, and before getting into bed, he tied Brush to the leg of a chair. But he had hardly gotten comfortable when a surge of tenderness and a sense of obligation made him think of how affectionate Brush was, and how docilely he joined in every kind of game. It made him feel a little bad to think that the poor thing would have to spend the night tied up, sleeping on the cold tiles, and on impulse, he jumped

out of bed with one bound, freed Brush from his leash, and took him into bed.

And—lo and behold—extraordinary things do have a way of happening, for long before he was asleep, the little boy noticed that the brush gave off life-like warmth, and that it pressed against his body wanting to be loved. Naturally, this struck him as a very serious matter, because it is one thing to play at turning a brush into a dog, and quite another to have the transformation really, truly take place. He got up, turned on the light, and discovered to his astonishment that the brush, without in any way losing the shape of a brush, was moving like a dog. It jumped and ran in circles around the boy and then rolled over with its tummy in the air to be patted. Anyone who heard of this prodigious event would surely ask where a brush which was still a brush could get legs to walk on and a tummy to turn up for patting. But if you once get past the main problem of granting it life of its own, these details are obviously too unimportant to be worth worrying about.

At least that was how the little boy saw it. All at once the desire came over him to go and wake up his parents and tell them all about the wonderful event. But since he was a judicious child, and well aware of the consideration a child must have for his parents, he decided to wait until the next morning.

Needless to say, he couldn't sleep at all that night, and early in the morning, as soon as he heard that that his mother was up and about, he went to find her with Brush under his arm.

«Look, mother», he said. «I found a brush that's really a dog. It moves, it recognizes my voice, and it has fleas!»

His mother looked at him without stopping her work, and answered, «Don't be silly, and throw that old thing away. You're a big boy now, and you should know better».

The boy felt offended, and he thought once again how conceited grown-ups were, and how absurd their way of life was. Without another word, he took Brush up to his room, thinking to himself that if they didn't want to believe him, it was their loss.

At lunch-time his mother, jokingly, told of the child's discovery, and his father laughed as if it were the silliest thing in the world. The boy said nothing in the way of a reply, because he knew that justice always prevails, and he hoped that, sooner or later, everyone would be able to see that some things just aren't as laughable as they seem to be.

And he wasn't far wrong either. The next night he was awakened by a yelp from Brush. When he came to his senses, he could hear the sounds of a fight coming from the study, and his father's voice calling for help. Brush was scratching at the door, strangely nervous. The boy opened the door and went downstairs on tiptoe. There he saw his father struggling with a burglar, who was getting the better of it and was about to hit the father over the head with a poker.

«Get him, Brush! Bite him!»

Brush ran like the wind, pounced on the thief, and bit him on the shin. The burglar was so surprised at being attacked by a thing like that that he gave himself up immediately and was turned over to the police, bound hand and foot.

Shortly afterwards, when the house was quiet again, the boy's mother, with tears in her eyes, promised that she would never again doubt her son's word. And his father, stroking Brush's back, said, «We'll build him a house in the yard, one with the latest in comfort. And over the door, we'll put a sign, painted by hand, that says:

«WE'RE NOT SURE THAT IT IS ONE, BUT IT DESERVES TO BE ONE.»

Original title: «Raspall», from: *Cròniques de la veritat oculta*. Editorial Selecta, Barcelona, 1955. *Obres completes (I)*. Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1984.

Weakness of character

PERE CALDERS

Translated by D. Sam Abrams

ONE DAY, when I was sleeping as I've slept so many, many times, I was awakened by a sound that came from my study.

«Here we go again!» I said to myself. «It's the burglar».

Very softly, walking on tiptoe, I covered the distance that separated me from the place where someone was despoiling me of my worldly goods. There I saw a gentleman with a sack, a complete stranger, who was choosing those things of mine that caught his fancy and putting them in a pile.

«Just a minute there! Let's talk this over...», I said to him.

He turned around, unruffled and without surprise, looked me up and down, and replied, «That won't be necessary. I've got you at a disadvantage. Just off hand, on a visual calculation, I'd say I weigh forty pounds more than you do. This natural advantage spares me all kinds of explanations. Are you armed?»

«No.»

«There. You see.»

And he proceeded to fill the sack with my possessions, acting just as if I weren't there. As is only right, I didn't resign myself so easily. «But, man, this isn't a question of brute force. You have to consider the moral issue, do you understand? Without principles you'll never get anywhere, and people will look at you askance...»

«Morality!», he said. «That's the most useless burden that a man can bear.»

And, becoming suddenly serious, he asked me, «Do you really believe in morality?»

«Of course, good lord, of course!»

He received this affirmation of my faith with considerable displeasure. He stopped his work, took me by the arm, and invited me to take a seat next to him on the sofa.

Then, he spoke to me as follows: «Look, you make me feel a bit sorry for you, and I'd like to give you the benefit of my personal experience.

At one time, I too put my trust in morality. I was married, I had a son, and a best friend, and a business. I had earned for myself the reputation of being the most irreproachable man in the neighborhood, and therefore, also the most boring. My confessor began to tremble as soon as he saw me, because my conscience was so spotless that it gave him no chance of showing off. «You're no fun!», he used to say to me, and exercising his powers, he gave me his blessing.

Sometimes the monotony of my life frightened me, but the peace that reigned in my home, the good name of my family, and the orderliness of my habits kept me company. «Steady, boy, steady», I said to myself. «All this will have its reward.»

And do you know what the reward was? Listen. One day my son, who had just turned fourteen, ran off with the maid. Flustered, I looked for my wife, to share my

sorrow with her, and all I found was a letter in which she explained that she had gotten tired of my dreary ways, and had gone to live with a man on the third floor, because he was fun and knew how to live.

Shattered, I decided to immerse myself in my business, and after a couple of days, I found out that my best friend, by some astute commercial maneuver, had taken it away from me.

The only person left to me was my confessor. I explained to him what was happening, and without even thinking it over, he said that the whole thing was my fault, and he gave me one of those penances that leave you speechless.

And my good reputation in the neighborhood? Well, I'll tell you. When I walked along the street, people turned around to look at me and laughed.

As you can imagine, it seemed a good time to take stock of my life, and I discovered that, up to then, I had been wrong. You can't go against the current, and if you do, you pay the consequences. That was so clear to me that I decided to change my way of life.

Now I find that I do what I want without my conscience bothering me, and everyone thinks I'm just fine. The women are after me, my acquaintances marvel at how nice I am, and the neighbors, when they feel inclined, say to each other, «You see, he seemed such an ass, but he'll wind up making his mark after all!»

That's my story. If it's of any use to you, there you have it.

«I'm going with you!» I said to him. «I'd hate to think I'd ruined my life by deciding too late.»

The next day, the following item appeared in the newspapers:

Early yesterday morning, thieves broke into an apartment on East Avenue. Among other valuables found to be missing was the owner of the apartment. No one seems to know the whereabouts of Mr. Calders, a fine, upstanding citizen and taxpayer.

Original title: «Feblesa de caràcter», from: *Cròniques de la veritat oculta*. Editorial Selecta, Barcelona, 1955. *Obres completes (I)*. Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1984.

Half on the sly

PERE CALDERS

NATHANIEL PASSED AWAY one day in the middle of the afternoon and for the time being he decided not to say anything to anyone. His wife had a heart condition and a blow like that would have been bad for her. So Nathaniel made an effort just to lie still in bed, clutching the blanket in his hands and trying not to let the look in his eyes glaze over.

At nightfall, a neighbor knocked on the door to ask for a cup of oil, and as she was an old family friend, she chose to pay the invalid a visit.

«He looks strange to me», she said. «As if he were under a spell. If I were you, I'd call for the doctor.»

«Nooo!» replied Martha, the faithful wife. «They have a way of doing that, you see. It's that sort of illness.»

The night passed, punctuated by the monotonous ticking of the bedroom clock, and at breakfast time the next day, Martha was a bit upset because Nathaniel had left his ladyfingers untouched.

«How about the newspaper? Don't tell me you're not even excited about having a look at the newspaper!»

Nathaniel stared blankly at his knees and payed no attention whatsoever.

The day elapsed amidst the persistent rainfall; through the steamed-up windowpanes one could see colored silhouettes blurred by the dampness. The flat was rather steamy and Martha kept saying again and again how nice it was to be at home.

On Tuesday, Martha phoned the doctor.

«...and what's more» she said, «he's lost his appetite. And he's out of sorts...» After a brief conversation, Martha hung up.

«What did he say?» asked the faithful wife's mother.

«He says they do that. But we mustn't let him sink into sloth.»

After a brief moment of thought, Martha added:

«Tomorrow, at lunch time, we'll sit him up at the table.»

* * *

The following day, at lunch time, Nathaniel had already been dead for hours and hours. But he wasn't going to give up now and he kept quiet in sullen defiance.

Martha, her mother, the neighbor and the son took hold of him and sat him up at the table.

«It's for your own good», they told him. «You've got to liven up a bit.»

They were fighting a losing battle.

«Don't tell me you don't want your chicken soup, now», said Martha in a whiny tone.

The mother-in-law sniffed the air like a greyhound.

«There's a strange foul smell around here. I think there's a gas leak.»

The son, who had given up studying Esperanto and gotten a job as an apprentice to a leading druggist, said: «What amazes me is that he doesn't utter a sound. Before, he always had plenty to say.»

With tears in her eyes, Martha ran the spoon across the lips of the body sitting in state.

«Try it, go on, taste it!»

«Nathaniel shook a maggot off one of his sleeves and fell flat on his face in his soup bowl.

«I can't take this any longer,» he said. «I'm sorry to be a party pooper.»

* * *

On the day of the funeral, the neighbor remarked:

«I don't think he drowned in the soup», she said. «If you really want to know the truth, I think it had been dragging for quite some time. Sometimes, the gesture of dying is of small importance...»

Then, lowering her voice, in a confidential tone she whispered into her interlocuter's ear: «Don't fool yourself. Something must have been eating away at him inside».

Original title: «Mig d'amagat», from: *Tots els contes*. Llibres de Sinera, Barcelona, 1968.

Chronology

1912 Born in Barcelona.

1918-1923 Elementary school at the Sant Pere Claver school and the Mossèn Cinto school, in Barcelona.

1929-1934 At the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona. Combines his studies with his work under Karel Cerny, the Czech graphic artist, and later for the firm *Cartonatges Francesc Sans*.

1932 Member of the editorial staff of the Barcelona daily «*Diario Mercantil*».

1933-1935 Member of the editorial staff of the newspapers *Avui* and *La Rambla*.

1936 Joins the «*Sindicat de Dibuijants Professionals*» and, together with «*Tisner*», contributes to the attempt to refloat the humorous weekly «*L'Esquella de la Torratxa*». Publication of his first collection of short stories (*El primer arlequí*) and his first novel (*La Glòria del doctor Laren*).

1937-1939 Joins the Republican army and is sent to the Front. His knowledge of drawing earns him a specialized position as a cartographer. This war-time experience is used in his book *Unitats de xoc*.

1939-1962 At the end of the civil war, Pere Calders is forced to go into exile, first in France and later in Mexico.

There he sets up the magazine *Lletres*, in conjunction with Josep Carner and Agustí Bartra. Editor of *Fascicles Literaris* (1958-1959). He also contributes to the magazines *Revista de Catalunya*, *La Nostra Revista* and *Pont Blau*.

1954 Wins the Víctor Català Award with his collection of short stories *Cròniques de la veritat oculta*, generally considered one of his most significant works.

1962 Returns to Catalonia.

1963 Wins the Sant Jordi Award with his novel *A l'ombra de l'atzavara*.

1963-1978 Contributes to the Catalan press: *Serra d'Or*, *Tele-Estel*, *Canigó*, *Oriflama*, etc.

1978 *Antaviana*, a selection of his stories adapted for the theater. The overwhelming success of the play draws great attention to Calders and his work. From this point on, increasing public acclaim for the author.

1979 His book *Invasió subtil i altres contes* awarded the Lletra d'Or.

1984 His book *Tot s'aprofita* receives the Crítica Serra d'Or Award and the Generalitat de Catalunya Award.

1986 Awarded the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes. His novel *Gaeli i l'home déu* wins the Crexells Award.



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